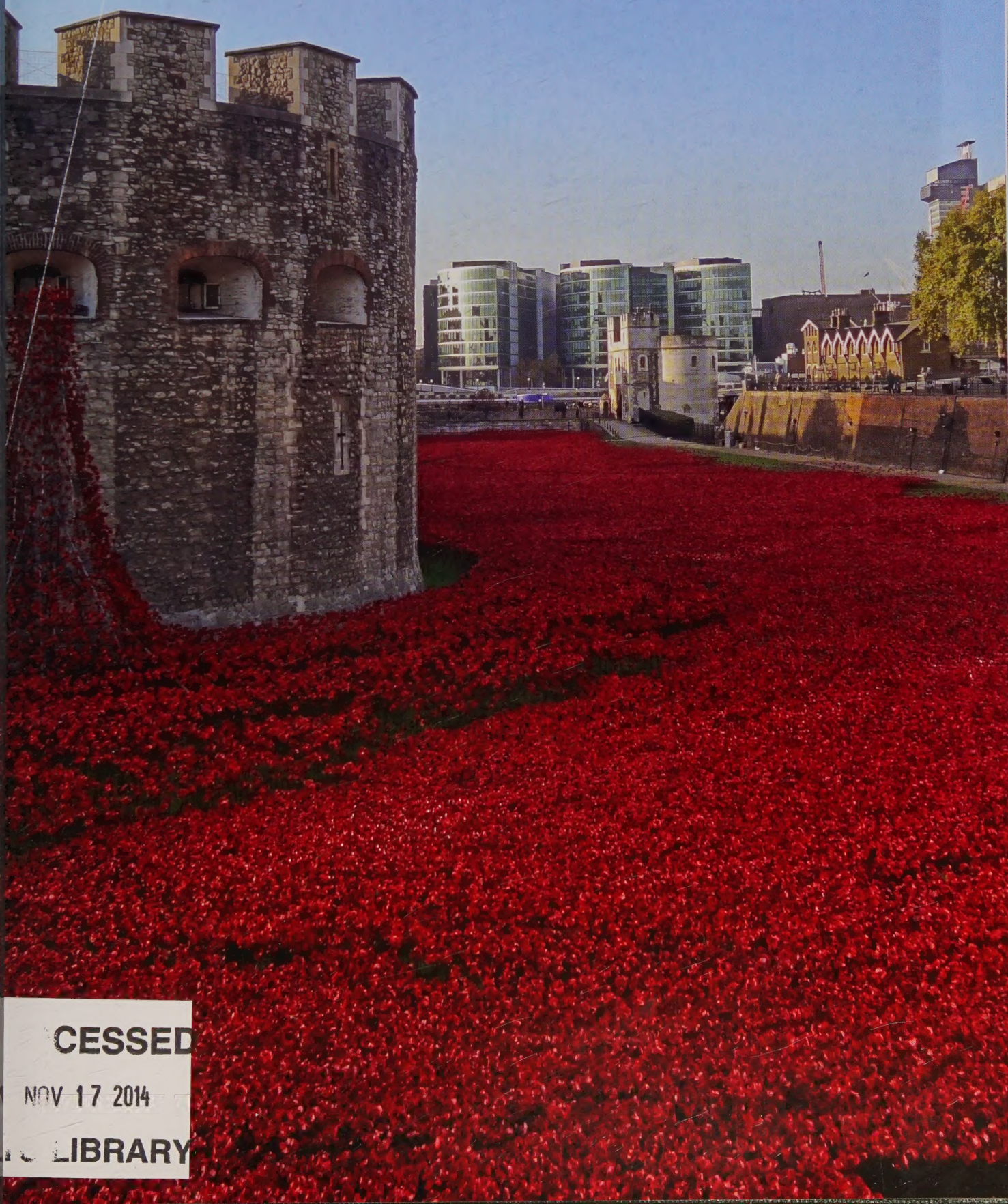


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Youth Mourning, painted by George Clausen, 1916. The painting is a response to the horrors of the First World War and, in particular, the death of Clausen's own daughter's fiancé. © IWM (Art.IWM ART 4655)

Let us not forget Lord

August 4th, 1914 - November 11th, 1918

As the blood red poppies flower again
in the green fields of Flanders,
let us not forget Lord
the men who endured, fought and died
there in the blood and the mud,
while a million poppies lay like bodies underfoot
and yellow smoke, malignant and acrid,
the poisoned serpent in the garden
fangs flickering, slithered silently
and inexorably across
a derelict land.

Let us not forget Lord
the bitter sounds of mourning throughout
shattered lands, as Rachel's sisters wept
for their lost children destined
never to return.

We too mourn a generation lost,
innocent victims all of a universal failure

of statesmanship and hope,
sacrificed to greed for power and prestige,
puppets of a ruler driven by ambition,
honour crippled by pain and fear.

As even now the long dark shadows
fall across quiet French fields,
let us not forget Lord
those who, in the name of their God,
perished a hundred long years ago,
that their king and country might be safe,
that their brothers and their sisters might be free.
But today, in the name of God,
we would stand not militant, but steadfast
before the forces of darkness,
seeking only for peace.

Amen. So may it be.

– Naomi Linnell

A cigarette case and a mystery

War souvenir prompts musings on the meaning of life

By John Midgley

It surprises people when I tell them that my father was a soldier in the First World War. Unlike many millions of others, he lived to tell the tale. He came home and settled down to raise a family of six children, in fact seven children, but child number six died in infancy and I came along to replace him. My father was into his 40s when I was born, and when a boy he sometimes used to talk

about his wartime experiences, beginning with the words, 'When I was in the trenches...' To me it was all rather mysterious and far away. He had been just an ordinary soldier – 'Tommy Atkins' was the term sometimes used – though I learned that he had been trained to use a machine gun. I once asked him if he had ever killed anybody, but he avoided a clear answer by saying that in the circumstances of battle it was impossible to tell.

It vexes me now that I didn't ask him a lot more about his soldiering experience, and didn't write any of it down. I can recall a few of his stories, and learned more by talking to my older siblings, but I didn't explore his history with him in a systematic way. I think this was because I had the strong impression that for him it was all in the past. There was no boasting, nor anything heroic about it, and he apparently only twice attended a reunion event, one of them a year after he had come home. He didn't enjoy it and never went again until, I think, 1978 when Birmingham City Council laid on a 60th anniversary reception for WW1 veterans and my sister had to cajole him into attending. All that he had ever wanted to do was get away from the trenches, get home and raise a family, which he did, though not without a struggle. Through the 1920s and 1930s, then WW2, life was far from easy for an ordinary, working-class Brummie family.

For many years he suffered from nightmares, and I can recall once or twice hearing him shouting out in the middle of the night. But it was something that was joked about. My mother would describe how she would thump my father until he woke up out of the nightmare, so that he would be quiet, and she and everyone could get back to sleep. He told us that he was dreaming about a struggle with a black knight; the black of night in the nightmare trenches perhaps?

During the war he had been wounded, twice, sent back for hospital treatment twice and returned to the trenches twice. Up in his bedroom was a box containing some souvenirs of his army days, and among them was a cigarette case with a bullet hole through it. This had been in the top pocket of his soldier's tunic when he was hit by one of a hail of bullets. Again, I

I was a

about his wartime



Lily and Harold Midgley with Harold in the uniform of the Royal Warwickshire Regiment. After the war, Harold struggled with dreams of a 'Dark Knight'. Photo provided by John Midgley. Harold's damaged cigarette case, a gift from Lily is left. Photo by Kate Taylor

never questioned him closely about this, but I used to boast to my school friends about my Dad and the cigarette case which my mother had sent him, filled with cigarettes, as a birthday present, which was in his top pocket and had saved his life when he was shot.

Many years later, as an adult, I mentioned to my father how I used to boast in this way, and I was astonished when he replied, 'That's nonsense. The bullet went the other way.' I was bewildered. If the bullet had come through his back and right through his body and out at the front, how on earth had he survived? He explained. The bullet had entered the back of his upper arm, gone right through his arm and had caught the corner of the cigarette case as it passed right through.

Though it had not saved his life in the way I had imagined, it nonetheless seems to me something of a miracle. If the bullet had gone only an inch or two to one side, it would surely have killed him, and I would not be sitting here at my desk, writing this piece for *The Inquirer*, now. 'No great loss!' I hear you cry – and I agree, but something in me is profoundly glad it didn't happen that way.

It has certainly made me think. If he had died, there would have been no marriage, no children, no grandchildren nor great grandchildren. All of these would be missing from the drama of human life that has brought me to where I am, writing this piece, right now.

If all of this were missing, what would be happening? Would someone else be here? Would none of us be here? Would I, perhaps, have come into existence some other way – by some other parents, some other time, some other place? I find that the more I try to think that through, the more bewildered I get. I have no answers to these questions. I simply have to accept all this as part of the fragile mystery of existence, a mystery we all live with, but brought home to me dramatically and vividly by a cigarette case with a bullet hole through it.

The Rev John Midgley is a retired Unitarian minister.

The INQUIRER

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*From the Object passed at the
General Assembly of the Unitarian and
Free Christian Churches 2001*

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Peace Pledge Union photo

Inquiring Words

Public Statement of Defiance

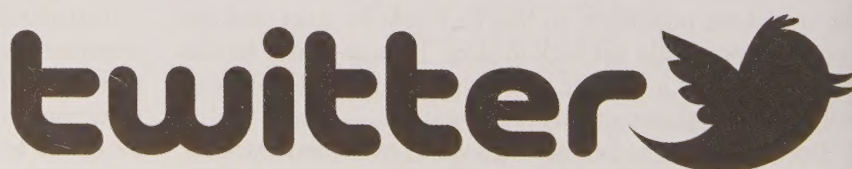
I am making this statement as an act of wilful defiance of military authority, because I believe the war is being deliberately prolonged by those who have the power to end it.

I am a soldier, convinced that I am acting on behalf of soldiers. I believe that this war, upon which I entered as a war of defence and liberation has now become a war of aggression and conquest. I believe that the purposes for which I and my fellow soldiers entered upon this war should have been so clearly stated as to have made it impossible to change them, and that, had this been done, the objects which actuated us would now be attainable by negotiation.

I have seen and endured the suffering of the troops, and I can no longer be a party to prolong these sufferings for ends which I believe to be evil and unjust. I am not protesting against the conduct of the war, but against the political errors and insincerity for which the fighting men are being sacrificed.

On behalf of those who are suffering now I make this protest against the deception which is being practised on them; also I believe that I may help to destroy the callous complacency with which the majority of those at home regard the continuance of agonies which they do not share, and which they have not sufficient imagination to realise.

*— Open letter, published in The Times newspaper 31 July 1917,
written by Siegfried Sassoon*



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faith in 140 characters. <https://twitter.com/>

Executive Committee September meeting

Executive Committee 2014 – Key Messages

1. Ministry Strategy Group

The appointment of Rev Daniel Costley as Chair of the Ministry Strategy Group and Rev Ant Howe as a member of the MSG were approved.

2. Budget and Congregational Quota 2014/15

The budget for 2014/15 was approved and in order to achieve a balanced position, following a projected deficit in the current year, a congregational quota was agreed at £35 per member. £5,000 was committed to the Ministry Strategy Group budget to enable them to support the ongoing work on ministry training subject to EC approval.

3. Continuing Professional Development (CPD) for Ministers

The Executive Committee stressed its strong support for Continuing Professional Development (CPD) for Ministers and asked that the Ministry Strategy Group consider how it might be taken forward and supported by the denomination, the Colleges and congregations.



The Rev Daniel Costley



The Rev Ant Howe

4. Annual Meetings 2015

The new venue at the Hilton Birmingham Hotel, near Birmingham airport and the NEC, was welcomed and the convenience to major rail and road connections was emphasised.

5. Safeguarding

The importance of all congregations taking their responsibilities seriously was reiterated. EC link members would be raising this issue with their link Districts to ensure congregations were supported. Joan Cook was appointed as Executive Committee member to take a lead on safeguarding and liaise with the Chief Officer.

6. President and Vice President

District Secretaries were to be reminded on the request for suggestions for nominations for positions of President and Vice President of the General Assembly for 2015/16 which will be considered by the Executive Committee at its November meeting.

7. EC Election Timetable

The Electoral Panel – Gavin Mason, Wade Miller-Knight and Howard Wilkins – had met with the Chief Officer and agreed that the Executive Committee election would be held after Christmas and therefore closer to the Annual Meetings where those elected would take up office. Anyone interested in finding out more about the role should contact the Chief Officer or speak to a current EC member.

8. IARF Council

Robert Ince was congratulated on his election to the Council of the International Association for Religious Freedom (IARF).

2015 Annual Meetings venue is switched

By Derek McAuley

Why are the Annual Meetings in 2015 in Birmingham? Those at the Annual Meetings at Whittlebury Hall in April 2014 had an excellent experience in a venue which was very different from the university campuses the General Assembly has used for the past several years. As was announced at the close of the meetings, we had hoped to return there for 2015. However, it proved impossible to come to satisfactory arrangements at a price we knew that attendees could afford.

Andrew Mason, our annual meetings organiser, has been able to source a new venue of a similar high quality hotel standard; the Hilton Metropole Birmingham Hotel. (See: <http://tinyurl.com/pnlz4ym>) It is to the east of Birmingham by the airport and the National Exhibition Centre (NEC) and has very good rail and road connections. The cost of coming to Whittlebury Hall by public transport was one of the issues raised by GA delegates in the feedback from the post-meetings survey. So, in 2015, a free shuttle bus service will be available for the short trip from the railway station to the hotel. Parking will be available at the hotel for a small fee.

The GA made a two-year deal for 2015 and 2016 and this has enabled us to keep the costs comparable with the 2014 costs.

I have visited the Hotel and it will provide everything we



The Hilton Metropole Birmingham Hotel is the new venue for the 2015 Unitarian General Assembly meetings. Photo provided © 2014 Hilton Hotels & Resorts

need including meeting rooms of a variety of sizes plus leisure facilities. We are busy finalising the arrangements for what will be an inspiring event and we look forward to seeing you in Birmingham next year.

Derek McAuley is chief officer of the Unitarian General Assembly.

Prayer before Battle

By German poet Alfred Lichtenstein

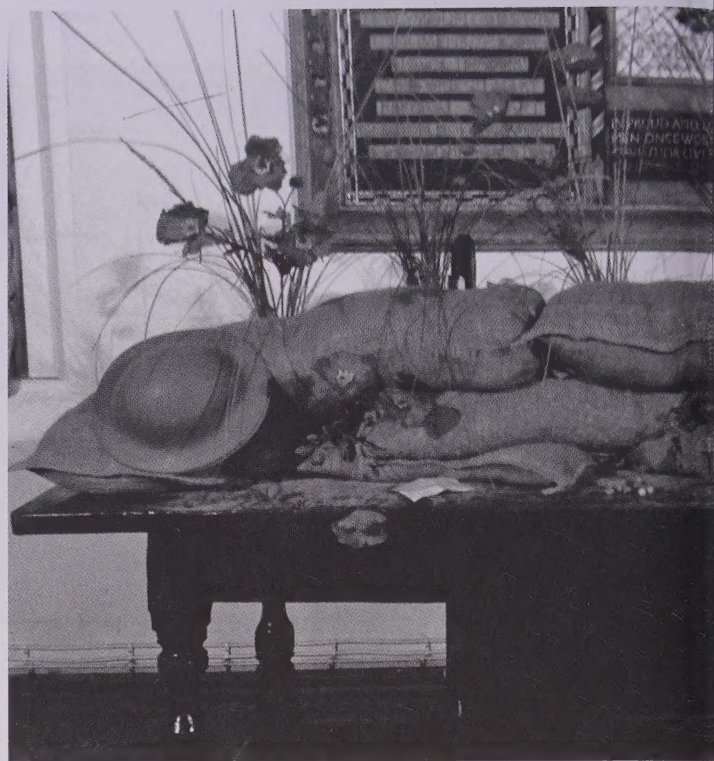
The soldiers pray fervently, every man for himself:
God, protect me from bad luck.
Father, son and holy ghost,
Please don't let any shells hit me,
Or those scoundrels, our enemies
Imprison or shoot me,
Don't let me kick the bucket like a dog
For the dear Fatherland.

See, I would like to still live
Milk cows, bang girls,
And beat up that rascal, Sepp.
And get boozed up many times
Before I meet my holy end.
See, I'll pray well and willingly
Say seven rosaries daily,
If, God, in your mercy
You kill my friends Huber or Meier
But spare me.
But if I've got to take it
Let me not be wounded too heavily.
Send me a light leg-wound,
A small arm injury,
So that I return home as a hero
Who can tell many a story.



British troops march, every man wearing full kit. Behind them are two mounted French officers, in their distinctive helmets and dark blue cloaks. They march along a road lined with bare, branchless trees. There is the edge of a ruined building in the left background.
By John Nash, 1918 © IWM (Art.IWM ART 1162)

Top photo: An altar tribute at Rosslyn Hill Unitarian Church, photo by Alan Ruston. Lichtenstein and Hale poems contributed by Ed Fordham.



Where now

Kent 201

There is a green place high on the cliff above
the menacing Goodwins and the sheltering Downs,
a log cabined park, clipped and trim,
but which has still the wild touch
as pale green wild liquorice spreads around
the gardener's stately hollyhock,
while pungent wild garlic and narrow leaves
of meadow sage line the banks
of a stream which sings softly as it meanders
relaxed through the quiet wood.

There is a copse near the wood's edge,
which encloses a ragged circle of bright space
where the morning sun gilds a clump
of late primroses and bathes the flowers
of the tall cow parsley with a dappled radiance.
In the centre of this oasis of light grows
a spear thistle, three feet high, elegant
in its new budding touched with Tyrian purple
and long leaves tipped with vicious spines,
a formidable green emperor preparing for war.

Along these same quiet coastal paths, in these same
woods

a hundred years ago through the hot summer of 19
came men to survey, to plan, to dig, to build.

Where now the wild liquorice grows,
are mounds and hollows, slabs of dressed stone.

Was there here a shelter, a trench,
an emplacement for a gun?

Did the gallant men of the 6th Cyclist Battalion
with rifles and ammunition slung across their backs
patrol these sweet green places?

Stand today beside the handsome barbed warrior,
turn to the North and let your imagination



When You Return

By Canadian Poet Katherine Hale
(real name: Amelia Beers Warnock)

WHEN you return I see the radiant street,
I hear the rushing of a thousand feet,
I see the ghosts that women come to greet.

I can feel roses, roses all the way,
The fearful gladness that no power can stay,
The joy that glows and grows in ambient ray.

Because slim lads come marching home from war?
Truly, slim lads, home from the Very Far:
From fields as distant as the farthest star.

It will be strange to hear the plaudits roll,
Back from that zone where soul is flung on soul,
Where they go out like sparks to one straight goal.

Where souls go out as moments fly,
Urging their claim on the unbending sky—
Surely it must be wonderful to die!

When you return I see the radiant street,
I hear the rushing of a thousand feet —
Living and dead with roses we shall greet.

the glory?

by Linnell

listen to the stuttering rattle of a rotary engine,
a limping Sopwith Camel coming into land.
Turn to the South and feel through every part of you
the unceasing shudder of the guns
merciless bombardment of the green fields
of France, where the bloodstained earth turns red,
and the land itself cries out 'Here is no glory,
these are the Plains of Death.'

From the corners of the world they came
and from this village too, among them
boys too young and men too old to contend
with the pain, the loss, the mud and the over arching
fear.

In the trenches there was courage and a bleak humour,
compassion and care for the wounded and the weak,
but in No Man's Land men abandoned, crucified
on the wire, screamed throughout the night,
and in the grey morning dead eyes
silently yearned for the green fields of Kent.

Little was gained from four bitter years of battle,
ten million civilians and ten million fighting men died,
twenty million wounded took home little but their
wounds.

Widows made destitute pawned their wedding rings
while crippled soldiers begged in our city streets,
and the sad hungry orphans of Germany
wept for fathers never returned.

What is there now to celebrate when both victim
and victor were the casualties of this war,
except perhaps its eventual ending?

Very little to glorify, but much to remember,
to respect, to regret, and to learn.

1945

By Kay Millard

When Peace came, the fighting stopped.
But the hatred and mistrust continued,
Since nations were still rivals
In the global one-upmanship stakes.

When Peace came, governments relaxed.
Now was the time to celebrate
Not having to fight a war,
By passing social legislation.

When Peace came, the men went home.
Proud and yet bewildered,
They brought their nightmares back
To jobs they had forgotten,
Wives they hardly knew,
And children who had grown without them.

When Peace came, the cost was counted.
Not the human cost, for that could never be,
But the money spent, the buildings flattened,
The resources gone for ever.

When Peace came, there was promise of a new
beginning.
"Never again!" they all shouted —
And then devised weapons, to ensure it.

Did Capek have a Nietzsche Moment?

While preparing a service I noticed, or *thought* I noticed, some deep echoes in Capek's famous hymn "Mother Spirit, Father Spirit, where are you?"

There has always seemed to me a strand of being lost, if not of underlying despair, in that hymn and that was highlighted when I happened to be using a quote from Nietzsche's "Thus spake Zarathustra", the famous lines on 'God is dead'.

First, I read Nietzsche:

"Zarathustra went down from the mountain alone, and no one met him. But when he entered the forest, an old man, who had left his holy hut to look for roots in the forest, suddenly stood before him.

"And what does the saint do in the forest?" asked Zarathustra.

The saint answered: 'I make songs and sing them, and when I make songs, I laugh, weep and mutter: thus I praise God.'

'With singing, weeping, laughing and muttering I praise the God who is my God. But what do you bring us as a gift?'

When Zarathustra heard these words he saluted the saint and he said: 'What should I have to give you? But let me go quickly, that I may take nothing from you!' And thus they parted from one another, the old man and Zarathustra, laughing as two boys laugh. But when Zarathustra was alone, he spoke thus to his heart: 'Could it be possible? This old saint has not yet heard in his forest that *God is dead!*'

Hymn 43 Universal Spirit

Mother Spirit, Father Spirit, Where are you?

*In the skysong, in the forest, sounds your cry.
What to give you, What to call you? Who am I?*

*Many drops are in the ocean, deep and wide.
Sunlight bounces off the ripples to the sky.
What to give you? What to call you? Who am I?*

*I am empty, time flies from me; what is time?
Dreams eternal, fears infernal haunt my heart.
What to give you? What to call you? O, my God*

*Mother Spirit, Father Spirit, take our hearts.
Take our breath and let our voices sing our parts.
Take our hands and let us work to shape our art.*

I often think that Norbert Capek's hymn captures my sense of uncertainty, of being lost and directionless in the vastness, perhaps even, in his terms, the sense that God might be dead. The echoing parallels of the forest and the gifts are not exact parallels and certainly not complete ones but they are slightly eerie. Did Capek have a shadow memory of Nietzsche as he wrote that hymn, or was he consciously echoing and answering Nietzsche? But then, in the last verse, Capek turns his hymn into a renunciation and a positive dedication, or is it a rededication after doubt?

Iain Brown is a member of the Glasgow congregation.

Margaret Barr's right-hand man dies

By John Hewardine

It is 41 years since the death of Margaret Barr. Margaret was a Unitarian minister who made her home in the village of Kharang, close to Shillong in Meghalaya, NE India, in the late 1940s. Margaret spent time with Mahatma Gandhi at his Ashram, studying his philosophy and way of living. This involved improving the quality of life for the majority of the Indian population, most of them in the villages. Education was an important element and Margaret was well equipped with good skills as a teacher. She asked the Mahatma what she should do and he said, 'Make your home in a village and live by example'.

This is exactly what Margaret Barr did. She was supported by Unitarians in the UK and in America and was assisted by the local Unitarian community in the village of Kharang. Dranwell Wahlang was one of her closest friends in the village. He was a young man, married to a woman who became a trained midwife and ran a Unitarian Health Clinic with her husband. Dran had many skills and became Margaret's right-hand man, driving her jeep and doing all manner of odd jobs. He built her a house which Margaret opened as an orphanage for waifs and strays of the community. Children were from a wide Khasi / Jaintia / Karbi community with a variety of religious backgrounds.

The clinic continued after Margaret's death, run by Kyiek Mukhim. Often

Dran would assist and he learned much from his qualified wife. Often he would look after the clinic and later opened one of his own in a nearby village. Sadly we have to announce that Bah Dran (Bah means brother in Khasi) died at their village home on 22 October, just before his 88th birthday. He was a true devotee of Margaret Barr and was involved with the village clinic for 40 years. Dran had suffered poor health for some years and was in and out of hospital for the last few. For this reason, as he declined in health, Dran stayed with his daughter in Shillong. Just two days before his death, he asked to be taken back to the family village. Although he was in poor condition to travel, the family agreed to his wishes and (in the traditional



*Dranwell Wahlang's traditional village grave.
Photo by Khlur Mukhim*

tribal fashion) Dranwell died and was buried in the family village where he had spent most of his life. His grave is close to the Annie Margaret Barr Secondary School. About 1500 people gathered for the occasion and 800 took food with the family. Much of the work was done by tribal friends. They even dug the grave. Many contributed food and the Mukhim family have expressed their gratitude for all the help they received.

A member of Dran's family reports: 'We are peaceful especially when Papa told us that he was contented and had no regrets. Though everything is changing, our faith is our strength because the divine is an eternal point of reference for us.'

*John Hewardine is a member of
Chorley Unitarians.*

How to create common affirmations

By Richard Gaines

Many Unitarians are cautious of the word 'theology' because it implies a theism that they do not hold. But a set of affirmations, such as those outlined in an article by Stephen Lingwood (*Inquirer*, 2 August) is precisely what we need as a movement – a clear, simple and inclusive statement of what we are about. And, although not perhaps doing theology in the traditional sense, we also need to flesh out and develop what such affirmations mean to us. In this Stephen has given us a start on which we must build.

My own Cirencester Fellowship decided a couple of years ago that we needed a clear statement of the principles and objectives of the Fellowship and decided that a set of Affirmations was the best way to do this. Two members, Miles and Jane Howarth, had recently joined us from Chelmsford and they shared with us a set of affirmations that the Chelmsford Fellowship had drawn up some years previously.

We saw in these a very good template for developing a set of affirmations of our own, and identified within them key words and phrases that we would wish to include in our own document. The actual process of drawing up and approving our affirmations was quite straightforward. We first produced a draft version – having members of the Fellowship with skills in drawing up documents of this sort was very helpful at this stage. The draft affirmations were then discussed by the Fellowship as a whole. As a result of this discussion some minor changes were suggested; these changes were incorporated in the draft wording to produce a final version, which was then approved by the Fellowship as a whole.

The Affirmations we produced read as follows:

1. *We perceive that the universe has an underlying order and unity and we offer an open and inclusive approach to the many ways in which humankind seeks to understand the ultimate nature of that reality.*
2. *We value life in its many forms, and affirm the unique worth and potential of each individual human being.*
3. *We cherish the freedom to work out and express spiritual matters for ourselves, searching for truth according to our understanding and experience, continually examining its implications and ready to accept wherever it may lead.*
4. *As the spiritual life thrives best when shared with others, we meet regularly in fellowship:*
 - a) *To develop our spiritual awareness of ourselves, of each other, and of the wholeness of reality within which we exist;*
 - b) *To learn from the spiritual and intellectual treasury of humanity as recorded in the major religions of the world and in philosophy and the sciences, and to share with each other our own unique spiritual visions;*
 - c) *To share in worship our common values such as truth, beauty, wonder, reverence, joy, justice, freedom, tolerance and reason;*
 - d) *To support and encourage each other in our journeys through life and to share our common responsibility of loving care and concern for the wider human family of which we are members.*

The intention was that our Affirmations should be an open and inclusive guideline to what our Fellowship was about, and that they should be simple to understand and not require further explanation. They reflect the fact that our Fellowship is at its heart a worshipping community, and that our spirituality and values grow out of, and are nourished by, our worship together. Our Affirmations are not set in stone; as part of the process of putting them in place we passed a resolution to re-examine them regularly and to make revisions as necessary.

I wonder whether other congregations have drawn up similar affirmations and, if so, I wonder whether they too might be prepared to share them more widely. Perhaps the set of affirmations that I have given as part of this article will inspire other congregations to produce affirmations of their own – any congregation seeking to do this is absolutely free to use any part of the wording of our affirmations if they find them helpful. We ourselves are very grateful to the Chelmsford Fellowship for the set of affirmations which were the parent of our own.

It would be good if we could use this as part of a process to evolve a set of affirmations acceptable to, and approved by, the movement as a whole. Such a set of affirmations could be pivotal in enabling us to achieve the common theology that Stephen Lingwood is seeking in his article. It would also enable us to present a clearer statement of what we are about to those outside the movement.

Richard Gaines is a member of the Cirencester Fellowship.

UUA Principles

Similar to the affirmations outlined by Richard, above, the Unitarian Universalist Association has a set of principles used by many of its congregations. They are strong values and moral teachings, as opposed to dogmatic statements. As the Rev Barbara Wells ten Hove explains, 'The Principles are not dogma or doctrine, but rather a guide for those of us who choose to join and participate in Unitarian Universalist religious communities.'

1st Principle: The inherent worth and dignity of every person;

2nd Principle: Justice, equity and compassion in human relations;

3rd Principle: Acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations;

4th Principle: A free and responsible search for truth and meaning;

5th Principle: The right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large;

6th Principle: The goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all;

7th Principle: Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.

Letters to the Editor

GA needs a motion about passing motions

To the Editor:

It's not essential to agree with every last word in Stephen Lingwood's critique of our Unitarian General Assembly Annual Meetings resolutions process (*Inquirer*, 27 Sept.) to recognise it as one of the more significant articles to have appeared in this paper in recent times – certainly as far as our internal processes go.

Accordingly, I would welcome our GA Executive Committee members using the piece as a de-facto briefing paper and discussing it at their next meeting with a view to making some concrete response. I can scarcely imagine a document framing the issues and options more clearly.

I was pleased that Stephen advocated for what we might term 'study motions'. I'm aware that the Unitarian Universalist Association has such a mechanism, where issues are explored over several years, and Stephen favours something similar. I guess I'm not entirely convinced of our ability as a smaller movement to sustain a single issue through such a long process (though he puts the case well).

I am wondering whether the movement should institute a more modest change. I would like to see a motion at the annual meetings to make *single-year* study motions an option.

The Assisted Dying resolution shows how a process stretching over two GA Meetings – rather than a somewhat perfunctory 15-minute discussion at a single AGM Business Session – produced much deeper engagement within congregations on a difficult and controversial issue. Yet this only came about when the original Fulwood Old Chapel proposal was referred back by the Annual Meetings, leading to the creation of that excellent study pack. I know there are resource implications. But we need to decide whether to get serious or to just play at having a social conscience which is, frankly, what it looks like much of the time – as Stephen has courageously pointed out. I agree entirely with Stephen that study motions would have to be very limited in number.

Like Stephen, I feel one issue would be enough for our Unitarian community to grapple with at any one time.

Motions could still be put forward by

the existing procedure until we have decided whether to adopt Stephen's more radical overhaul – or something similar. Such a relatively simple change – I say 'relatively simple' – would be a meaningful step in the right direction towards a far more constructive response to the challenges of our contemporary world.

The Rev Matthew Smith

Ipswich and Framlingham, Suffolk

Resolutions keep issues on the national Radar

To the Editor:

Re General Assembly Resolutions and Parliament

Unitarians are represented at Radar, an informal group of national churches' representatives who exchange views and information, coordinating their churches' public policy work. When taking decisions about what to support of the forthcoming Parliamentary Bills and the work of other churches, I use the Resolutions as a guide.

For Resolutions to be more effective, we need to lobby MPs in the four nations, with co-ordinated activities including:

- A national Unitarian database of specialists in specific fields (to give technical knowledge for a campaign).
- Members willing to write to their own MP about a Bill going through the Parliaments or Assemblies
- Congregations co-ordinating a campaign on specific issues and sending volunteers to other lobbying groups
- PR highlighting our stand on campaigns.

We are volunteers, and we need to work together on this. You will notice that I am not in favour of faith groups pulling out of policy work, public life or our elected national bodies. Our Unitarian voice *does* count.

Karen Hanley

Unitarian Representative to Radar
St Albans

Birmingham GA will enhance community

To the Editor:

I'm relieved to hear that the venue for the 2015 Annual General Assembly has been changed from Whittlebury Hall to the Birmingham Hilton Hotel. Arranging accommodation and conference facilities for hundreds of people is not easy, and market forces

can threaten efforts to keep the price down. But, apart from the issue of price, I feel that last year's venue was unsuitable.

1) Accessibility: We have reached a point in mass mobility when the car is no longer the transport of choice. To choose a venue with no access for those travelling by train or coach was a backward step; to have to beg a lift in someone else's car – or take a long taxi ride – was unacceptable.

2) Choice of venue: Everyone appears to have enjoyed the health spa. But what did it have to do with being Unitarian? I'm not ashamed of having Puritan values – do we attend the GA just to have fun? Or do we want to work out issues relevant to Unitarians, to learn? Do we choose to have a manicure, play golf, relax with a beauty treatment? We may do just that – but do we need it at a GA?

3) A sense of place: Meeting in Birmingham will be a step towards a reconnection with our heartlands – the congregations. At least we are returning to a city with a great Unitarian past, relevant to us today. It is quite easy, in these days of virtual communication, to lose our sense of place, the presence of bricks and mortar, the gravity of the ground beneath our feet. Our historic chapels have that sense of place in abundance; they remind us of our ideals and are worth sharing as often as we can.

4) Of course our congregations are mostly small, and unequal to running a large conference. But they will not grow and prosper by being ignored. Somehow we have to embrace Unitarians who are meeting every week or month, within the wider community of our country and our world. One of the joys of attending GA meetings for me has been meeting people from the other side of the country, even from the other side of the world whom I would never have met otherwise; sharing with them ideals, opinions, ideas; joining them in a brief time of common life.

5) Should we devise more modest ways of organising our annual meetings? I look forward to attending future GAs with a renewed awareness of who we are, where we are, and how we as a Unitarian community can make meaningful progress.

Judy Hague
Sheffield

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News in brief

Youth clean up, commemorate war, serve community



In October, four Unitarian youth joined with SimpleGifts in East London for a day of community service and creative artwork. Supported by GA Youth Coordinator, the Rev John Harley, and SimpleGifts staff Rev Rob Gregson and Ann Howell, the day began with a “Rubbish Walk” litter pick, and ended with a large community art installation hanging on the front of the Mansford St Church. Families from the weekly After-School Clubs came later in the day for a pizza party with our youth volunteers providing face painting and games/arts & crafts.

Everyone pitched in to help create a 7' x 6' “found art” installation made of local recyclables. Featuring a large rubbish bin and giant red poppy with the words “Don’t Waste Peace” across the top, the artwork was timed to commemorate the Centenary of WWI and will hang on the outside of the chapel through Armistice Day.

Thank you to our young people – Connie Wagner, Lili Kramer, Jessica Riley and Alexander Riley – for helping to make the day a success! Here’s what Connie and Alex had to say about the event:

From Connie: Good points that me and my peers enjoyed were being with each other whilst helping out with things. Being with your friends changes how you feel about picking up litter. The public seemed to like what we did and asked what it was for. The face painting was fun because we were happy, the children were happy and the parents were happy

too. Doing these sorts of activities makes you feel like a better person and that you are really making a change other than just saying you want to change the environment. I really enjoyed it and I would recommend it.

From Alex: It was very fun and interesting, also I learnt more about World War I and just how some rubbish can make something fantastic. Also, my surprise to how much rubbish there can be on the streets! In the morning we strolled around Bethnal Green picking up rubbish that was left around streets, parks and roads. After we picked up the litter, we went back to the church to tie the rubbish onto our design and set up the food for the event which was taking place in the afternoon. Finally, the special guests started to arrive and we started to paint and finalise our design. There was lots to do there: paint, face paint, play football, laugh and chill out. When all the fun and games were over, we finally had a look at the finished piece of artwork. To sum it all up this was a great day filled with lots of fun and activities. I would definitely come again 100 times!

– Ann Howell



Unitarian General Assembly President Marion Baker (centre, with ribbon) recently led the Harvest Festival at Bradford Unitarians. Her service title was ‘Cherishing Our Earth’. The offertory was donated to the Bradford Soup Run to help feed homeless people. The congregation was thrilled to have four visitors including a child. After the service the members and visitors enjoyed a faith lunch and good conversation.



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